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# THE SCHOOL REVIEW

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## FORMALISM IN DEFINING HIGH-SCHOOL UNITS

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There is grave danger that our effort to standardize high schools in this country will lead us into a formal evaluation of school work which in the long run will utterly defeat the purposes for which the principle of standardization was evolved. There is a natural psychological reason for the tendency to gravitate toward quantitative formalism. It is easy to determine how many hours a high-school student has attended classes; it is well-nigh impossible to find out what kind of mental processes he has developed during these hours. We hold fast, therefore, to the requirement that he attend classes regularly and we neglect to inquire about his intellectual habits.

It will be answered at once by those who look on the "unit" as an established standard that the consideration of intellectual habits and mental processes is the task of the teacher. The unit is an administrative device; it is not intended in requiring so and so many units to interfere with the teacher's function of producing a high quality of scholarship. Indeed, it will be further urged, there are other safeguards, such as entrance examinations and inspections, which are organized for the purpose of compelling the teacher or aiding the teacher, as the case may be, to maintain a high quality of work.

In spite of these safeguards, however, it can be shown that the natural drift toward quantitative formalism is making it more and more difficult for the teacher to produce a high quality of work. The number of credits which a student presents is so important in many connections that the kind of unit is not thought of seriously. It is further the thesis of this paper that a positive and energetic campaign should be organized to counteract this drift toward formalism.

The present situation will be most clearly set forth if we consider briefly the steps by which we have come to the point at which we now stand.

The most influential forces in defining a unit are the Report of the Committee of Ten, the Standards of the North Central Association, and the Standards of the Carnegie Foundation. Other agencies have contributed to the solidification of the definition of a unit, but these three institutions are of leading importance.

The Report of the Committee of Ten speaks of fifteen hours a week as the normal quota of work for a high-school student. Twenty hours is mentioned as an exceptional program. This means that a student who graduated from the high-school course twenty years ago would have to his credit twelve units as a normal basis for graduation and for admission to college. The amount of work expected of a student pursuing only three courses is in sharp contrast with the amount which a student could take in each of his courses under later definitions of a unit.

In its fourth annual report the Carnegie Foundation laid down the following definition: "A unit represents a year's study in any subject in a secondary school, constituting approximately a quarter of a full year's work." Here we see that twenty periods a week is set up as a normal program. It was doubtless thought that this requirement meant more work on the part of high-school students. It does not follow, however, that a student taking four units a year is any more industrious than a student taking three units. On the other hand, it is absolutely certain that teachers and students alike will face their tasks in an entirely different spirit when they know that the program of the week is long and scatters over a great variety of subjects.

The definition of the North Central Association avoids any reference to the other units taken in the year; that is, the Association permits less than one-fourth of a year's work to constitute a unit. The Association's definition is as follows: "A unit course of study in a secondary school is defined as a course covering an academic year that shall include in the aggregate not less than the equivalent of one hundred and twenty sixty-minute hours of classroom work" (2, p. 67).

The Association explicitly recognizes that this definition does not agree with the Carnegie unit, for the statement is included in the Standards: "More than twenty periods per week should be discouraged."

This series of definitions makes it clear that there has been a rapid quantitative expansion of the high-school course. The colleges have contributed to this expansion by their requirements for admission. They have asked for fifteen units and they have asked for a great variety of subjects. When they began to require fifteen units for admission it was at once evident that the minimum which could be taken by any given student in at least three years of his course is twenty hours a week instead of the fifteen which was constantly in the mind of the Committee of Ten. Furthermore, the ordinary student believes that he must provide in his course for the emergency of failure. He finds that losing one or two courses during the four years of his attendance in the high school will jeopardize his graduation and admission to college. He consequently elects more work than is absolutely required in order to make perfectly certain that he will get the requisite number of credits.

There is another motive which is equally strong, namely, the motive of satisfying the double requirements of the high school for graduation and the college for admission. In some cases these two sets of requirements do not coincide. Consequently the student who wishes to go to college finds it necessary to take some additional courses in order to meet the special requirements of the institution which he expects to attend. This conflict between the demands for the high-school course and the college is still further exaggerated by the fact that the student may determine late in the

high-school course which college he is to attend. He finds in his Junior or Senior year that he has not provided all of the units required by his chosen institution, and again he must make up for his late decision by pursuing more units than the normal.

These and a great variety of personal considerations which might be enumerated have brought it about that students not infrequently pursue in their high-school courses as many as five units instead of the four which have come to be the minimum. This means that the number of periods of work pursued each week is from twenty to twenty-five in the case of many students. Furthermore, it will be remembered that the weaker students are the ones who commonly find it necessary to take the maximum number of hours.

What effect does this large number of hours have upon the work of each individual course? Evidently the organization of the school will have to take cognizance of the great variety of courses being carried by an individual student. In the early days of high-school organization, when the Committee of Ten assumed fifteen hours a week of work, it was reasonable to expect that the individual student would do in each course a great deal of outside work. It was reasonable to assume that a long lesson could be assigned in view of the fact that the student had only two other lessons to prepare on that day. But now the demands have increased, and since the student has to prepare five lessons, or at least four, the individual instructor finds himself embarrassed in assigning the amount of work which was commonly assigned twenty years ago in any single course. The discussions of home study make it perfectly clear that students find the burden of preparation in some schools very heavy. We shall have occasion later to refer to the other considerations which surround home work. Attention is called at this point merely to the fact that the alternative lies before the teacher of demanding more outside work of the student who is pursuing four or five units, or of lowering the standard of the course so as not to include as much material as was once common in the days when students had only three courses. We see, accordingly, that the increase in the number of courses has produced as its inevitable consequence a reduction in the amount of

work which is done in each one of the courses. There can be no doubt that the show which the colleges have made of increasing their apparent standards by increasing the number of courses has in many cases at least merely redistributed the energy of students without actually producing the supposed result of more work.

A second type of considerations which immediately arise will be found in the fluctuations which are accepted in the grades given to students and the amount of work which will be accepted for a pass in a given course. Two familiar facts are here pertinent: In the first place, the constituency of the high school has changed very greatly in the last two decades. From a small institution attended by a selected group of students, all of whom were looking forward to one of the professional careers and many of whom were expecting to teach, a high school has expanded into a cosmopolitan institution attended by all classes of students. The instructor now finds that he must deal with students who are not especially interested in the subject for vocational reasons, and he can enforce his scholastic requirements only up to the point which is reasonable in view of the heterogeneous character of the population of the high school.

In the second place, the variety of courses offered in the schools in response to the demands of this new constituency is one of the most impressive facts in our present-day school organization. This variety we have not yet mastered. We cannot escape the conviction that there is a great difference between a standard in mathematics and in manual training, between Latin and English literature, and between public speaking and science. Since these standards are so various, the instructor hesitates to fail a student because he does not comply with the expectations of his particular department. Failure in this case might mean that the department would not be popular in the school. It might lose some of the elections which it desires in order to keep up its numbers. It might find itself dealing with students in a fashion wholly different from that exhibited by other departments, and so might be open to censure in faculty councils as well as in the opinion of students. The result is that there is a strong temptation to allow a wide range of variation in the work demanded for the passing of a course.

Passing of a course is looked upon in many schools as a kind of concession which can be permitted without reference to the grading system in general. The teacher will indicate frankly that he is quite willing to let such and such a student go through the school and graduate, but he would not recommend him for college-entrance examinations and he would not think of certificating him for college. In fact, several of the accrediting agencies of the country have recognized this distinction with perfect clearness and have asked school principals to distinguish between the students whose work is of such a character as to justify the expectation that they ought to continue in higher schools and those who merely pass for purposes of graduation from the high school. This kind of distinction has been growing rather than diminishing. In fact, it may be said that there is less effort today to eliminate students than ever before. It cannot be argued that this tendency to avoid the elimination of students is wholly bad, but if the high school has to recognize this wider range of variations the quantitative definition of the unit is evidently becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. A teacher cannot have all kinds of students in his class, with all sorts of intellectual ambitions, and administer his course with the same straightforward singleness of purpose that characterized his work twenty-five years ago.

Another influence which is tending to make impossible uniformity in the definition of a unit grows out of the fact that the elective system has redistributed the courses in such a way that it is now quite impossible to distinguish sharply between those courses which are administered in the earlier part of the curriculum and those which come late in the student's high-school career. When the curriculum was a required curriculum it was relatively easy to adjust the work of any given subject to the demand of the particular students who were expected in that course. The first-year Latin course was intended for Freshmen, and the demand made upon Freshmen was adjusted to their intellectual maturity and to the other required subjects which they were taking up parallel with their Latin. The student was expected to advance regularly from this first-year work to the work of the later years in his course. But with the introduction of the elective system a great change

has come in this matter. A few of the courses, such as Latin, English, and mathematics, continue to have a relatively sharp distinction between the work of the early years and the work of the later years of the curriculum. But this distinction does not obtain for science work, for history, and for the modern languages. A student may decide to take the first course in French when he is a Junior or he may decide to take only one year of French and may place this in his Senior year. Science is very commonly not open to students in the Freshman year, but is equally open to all members of the three later classes. And so on through the list one may enumerate the different adjustments which have been made, permitting students of all years to mix in a single course.

This mixture of students of different degrees of maturity operates to break down the unity of the course. The teacher hardly feels justified in applying the same measuring rod to the Freshmen and Seniors in his class, with the result that the range of work accepted differs greatly in different individuals. But above and beyond this mere variation within the course appears the fundamental fact that it is quite impossible to conduct a course of this type, including students of all of the different classes, in the way in which the course could be conducted if the students were homogeneous. For example, let us assume the case of a German class made up in part of students who have studied Latin and in part of students who have not taken Latin. Add to this the fact that some of these students have pursued two years of rhetoric and English while others have pursued three years of the English courses and still others have taken only the English given in the elementary schools. All of these students in German encounter certain matters of rhetoric and certain matters of grammatical construction which are necessary to the proper development of the German course itself. The instructor must either throw upon the individual student the responsibility of getting through by doing privately work which he has not had in regular courses, or else the class must review these fundamental considerations as a part of the German course. In either case the definition of the unit is made more and more difficult by the alternatives which are presented to the German teacher of conducting his course adequately under conditions



that present to him a very heterogeneous group of students. It becomes necessary for such an association as the North Central Association to consider seriously the grading of courses which are given in the elementary years and those which are given in the advanced years of the high-school course. The definition of the unit will undoubtedly have to take into account such distinctions as these. It is not enough to say of the unit that it is a year of work. The question is, Which year of work is it?

In the fourth place, there is the widest variation in the amount of work done by students in addition to the classroom work. Here again a great social change has been going on very rapidly in the high school. There are many students who find themselves absorbed in social engagements of various types and these students unquestionably are handicapped in the intellectual work which they are supposed to be doing in the high school. Again, it is not our business at the present moment to determine the proper ratio of outside activity and purely scholastic work in the high school. The fact is that a great deal of social activity is regarded as legitimate at the present time by most of those who are in charge of high schools and colleges. The result of this outside work is esteemed by the student and his family to be quite as important for his individual life as the outcome of his scholastic endeavors. The majority of high-school students are so clear on this matter that if they were consulted, and furthermore if their families were consulted, one would hear the judgment that social activities and athletic activities are more important than a great share of the scholastic work of the school. One could base on these considerations a strong argument for the recognition through the school of many activities that at the present moment are regarded as wholly outside activities. If the school is going to train its students properly, and if the community believes that a part of this proper training lies in dances, receptions, and athletic activities, why should not the school organize these activities as a part of the regular training of students? The mere statement that the work is different from the ordinary scholastic work does not free the agents of society who are training these young people from the responsibility of finding out what value these outside activities

have for the improvement of students. In a certain sense the school has long recognized the logic of this argument. Social activities are not neglected as a matter of fact in most high schools. Even though they stand outside the circle of required courses and even though the social activities are not supervised directly by instructors, the influence of these social activities is explicitly recognized. The social activities are taken into account in every assignment. Every teacher knows perfectly well that he cannot expect the amount of time which he otherwise would command because the leading members of the class are engaged in dramatics, in receptions, in athletics, and other forms of occupation which the community and the school recognize as perfectly legitimate. In fact, the instructor who is not obliged to recognize forms of activity which he himself regards as illegitimate is an extraordinarily fortunate member of the educational fraternity. It is just this lack of definition of what is legitimate and what is not legitimate which makes one uneasy in his definition of the unit. A unit no longer commands a clearly stated part of the student's time. The unit certainly does not receive one-third of a student's intellectual and physical energy in the course of a year. It does not even command one-fourth of the intellectual and physical energy of the student. It probably does not command one-fifth, and one might go on with the speculative fractions in vanishing series, asking how far a unit does succeed in commanding the time and energy of students.

In this state of confusion there is grave danger that we shall not give in many courses enough work for certain of our best students. If a student of set purpose refuses to participate in outside social and athletic activities, preferring to give himself up entirely to specialized training for the profession which he is to enter, should he not be given some scholastic advantage over his fellow who has made up his mind that purely scholastic preparation for a later business or professional career is too limited? If a student wants to elect as part of his course music and drama and art, is it not possible that we ought to accommodate him in this matter? Perhaps we ought to require of him a smaller number of school units. Perhaps, on the other hand, we ought to require him to spend five

years in the school, so that he may get an abundance of the kind of training that he seeks. This would undoubtedly meet with the approval of many students and might meet with the approval of their families. It would at least define the issue with all clearness, and we should come very shortly to a decision on the question of credit to be given for music and other forms of activity. At all events it is folly to shut one's eyes to the fact that the school work of many students is being done in an undefined intellectual and social environment, and the proportion of time and energy which is given to any single course is wholly problematic under present conditions.

We might add as the fifth and sixth considerations those strictly academic considerations which grow out of the training of teachers and the distribution of courses among trained and untrained teachers. It is assumed that five hours of work a week in all high schools constitute a unit, even if the course is under the direction of a college graduate who has done advanced work but knows nothing about how to teach. The same assumption too often holds even when the course is under a college graduate who has no special knowledge of the subject or of teaching. The qualifications of teachers are nowhere standardized. We have no method of training or testing secondary teachers in this country. There is less uniformity among secondary teachers than in the training and examination of elementary teachers. Yet the actual administration of the courses depends so largely upon the ability of these teachers that it is astonishing that we should be at all complacent in the matter of definition of the number of courses when we are so free in employing teachers of the widest variation in native ability and training.

As pointed out above, there is a consideration which grows out of the distribution of courses. Here is a high school which has a single session, doing all of its work during a crowded forenoon and allowing the students to go away for the whole afternoon and allowing them, by virtue of this organization, to direct their own energies during a very large part of the day. In another high school the tradition of the community is such that each student comes to the school early in the morning and with a brief interval at noon stays

until the middle of the afternoon. In some of the technical schools the students stay until late in the afternoon. In these various types of organization the amount of work which can be accomplished is measured only in terms of the single day's exercise, as though that could be isolated from the whole organization of the school. A unit in a well-organized high school is quite as unlike a unit in a badly organized high school as a good piece of legislation in the midst of a well-organized constitution is unlike a single, isolated enactment which has no force because it is not supported by the necessary collateral legislation.

Another conspicuous example of formalism which incumbers present-day organization is that formalism which requires small advanced classes to meet as frequently as large elementary courses. Why should a good teacher who has a class of five in advanced algebra meet that class as often as he meets his elementary class of thirty and then give to the student who gets 90 in one course the same credit as he gives the student who gets 90 in the other course? What we need is a study of high-school courses which will equate courses.

Many a reader of the foregoing criticism of a unit will doubtless be very impatient with the enumeration of difficulties and will say that these difficulties have all of them been recognized in times past and all good schools have taken steps to meet these difficulties. One who objects to the foregoing discussion on such grounds as these is in danger of missing the whole point of the discussion. It is not the aim of this paper to advocate the abandonment of standardization because of the shortcomings of our present system. It is the purpose of the foregoing statements to call attention to the fact that what is needed is a treatment of the unit in a vigorous spirit which shall encourage those schools that are well organized and are taking cognizance of all of the defects in the present definition to go on with the kind of work which they are doing. The good high school which knows what it is about ought to be in a position to recognize all of the variables and to include them in its treatment of a given unit. For example, coming back to the matter of an advanced course in algebra, here is a course which is to be administered to a small group of homogeneous

students. They have all of them pursued mathematics up to a certain point. They are all of them known to be earnest students, desiring to prepare themselves for advanced work. They are to be trained by a teacher who is thoroughly competent. How many hours a week ought they to be required to attend class? Any sane administrator of the high school knows that the answer to this question is wholly different from the answer to a similar question which might be raised in the following terms: Here is a class of students who, for one reason or another, are going to begin Latin. Some of them are trying to fulfil the traditions of a scholarly family. Some of them have been driven into this course by the urgency of the school principal. Some of them have a remote expectation of entering a college which requires Latin. Some of them go into this course because their friends are going into the course. The work is to be done by a young teacher who has just been employed by a board of education which pays no attention to the recommendation of its superintendent and principal and has hired a local candidate who belongs to an influential family in the city and wants to be employed for a few years before she gets married. The problem now is, How much time ought to be given to these classes in algebra and Latin in order to produce a unit of credit in each? Presumably the class in Latin ought to meet fifteen or twenty times a week if it were not for the fact that each meeting is likely to do more harm to the intellectual life of the student than good. The pathetic fact is that under the influence of our present quantitative system it will take a Herculean effort to differentiate between these two situations.

Perhaps the advocate of the examination system of admitting students to college will see here his opportunity to suggest a cure for the difficulty. This prescriber of examinations should note first that the inequalities within the high school are reflected in the college requirements. Read a Greek paper, if you can find one today, and compare it with a paper in the same department when Greek was a common subject. Who knows how to set an examination in English that represents the same degree of training as an examination in geometry? Let our examiner note one further fact: The amount of credit given a student is not determined by

the examination, but by the record of the number of periods of high-school work which he took as a preliminary requirement before he could be admitted to the examination. The examination system is in the grip of quantitative formalism no less than the general administration of high-school courses.

Nor will qualitative definitions help the matter. The formal quantitative evaluation of units must be corrected by a more equitable quantitative definition. If one does not accept the statement that qualitative definitions will not meet the case, let him read the history of those efforts which have been made in the past to enumerate the topics which are to be taught in a unit course. From time to time various associations and various colleges have attempted to set down in great detail the topics which should be covered by a high-school course. We pass over the humor of the effort of a college faculty to tell a high-school teacher what topic he ought to cover. The one who determines what secondary-school students need ought to be someone who knows secondary-school students and who has had some practical contact with the problem of training their immature minds. Furthermore, what such students need cannot be defined in anything more than a suggestive way in any table of contents that ever was written.

It is perfectly clear to anyone who has seen high schools in different sections of the country that it is quite impossible to give any universally acceptable enumeration of topics. It is not that intellectual life in one part of the country is entirely different from intellectual life in another, but it is true that the selection of topics depends very largely upon the teacher, and certain aspects of the subject depend upon the illustrative material that is readily at hand. He who would define a high-school course by enumerating the topics which are to be taken up in that course fails to recognize these personal and local differences. One has only to consider the efforts of some of the committees which are now struggling with the problem to realize that it is no longer possible to organize a single committee with geographical range broad enough to cope with its problem. One hears from time to time the statement that the work of the Committee of Ten needs revision, but the work of the Committee of Ten will never be done if the attempt is made

once more to define courses for the whole United States. There must be a definition of high schools and high-school units which will allow enough latitude in the subjects covered in each of the different departments to give different teachers and the different localities their legitimate share in the solution of the problem.

Furthermore, the qualitative definition will have to recognize differences between individual students. There is no reason at all why students should not have more or less credit for work done in the same class. Every teacher knows that this difference exists. If by any leveling process we give currency to the assumption that all students in a given course are alike, and above all if we talk as though it were the best members of the class who are getting the real credit for a given course, we shall be deceiving ourselves, as we have for some years deceived ourselves, with the merely quantitative definition of a credit. Some students get twice as much out of a course as others, if not three or four times as much. Some students get out of courses habits of diligence and study, habits of concentration of attention, and habits of systematic thinking which other students fail to get. At the present time the teacher has no opportunity or encouragement to trace these distinctions. He must either pass the student or not pass the student. When the student has safely passed in the course, there is only one question raised with regard to him: Shall we certificate him to college or not? If the high school should attempt to say to the college that here is a student who is three times as good as another student coming from the same class, the college would doubtless respond that the terminology of the high school is so obscure that it would have to be referred to a special committee of the faculty. It is doubtful whether the special committee of the faculty would have linguistic knowledge enough to unravel the meaning of this phrase. It is so much simpler to use the term "unit" and say that students have a unit of credit. That word requires no special meetings of college faculties. We all use it to cover up a multitude of inequalities and are so complacent about the matter that it is disturbing to have anyone suggest any other possibility of any kind whatsoever.

What can it mean that one student gets twice as much out of a course as some other student? To be sure, society will recognize this distinction a little later, in the fact that one boy who has a college course will get a position five times as good as the position which is given to his classmate, and society will say of the schools that they do not know enough to distinguish between good students and bad students. Society does not say that all college graduates should have the same salary and all high-school graduates should have the same standing in the business world. Our use of the unit will ultimately have to be refined to include some of the gradations commonly recognized in society's more intelligent discriminations. Would it not be well to take a suggestion from society in this respect and try out a scheme of re-equating credits? Would it not be well to leave high schools a very large freedom in the organization of their units? Or, to put the matter definitely, would it not be well to say to any high school: "Organize your courses as in your judgment is best suited to the needs of your students and your staff of instructors. If your advanced algebra can do with three hours a week the work of your elementary Latin in six hours a week, that is for you to judge. If, after the student has completed the course, you find that he is well advanced in intellectual maturity and powers of reasoning, you may report that fact to the college in terms that seem to you to be appropriate. You may say to the college, 'This student has one and a quarter or one and a half units, or you may say that he has two units.' The college, in turn, having accepted this student, will observe his work with care and will report back to you whether or not your judgment is good. If your judgment is bad, then the college will have to reserve the right to ask for improvement in your organization before it accepts further students from you on the basis which you define."

This suggestion will sound to some to savor of anarchy. It will be said by some, "How can colleges come in contact with high schools on any such basis as this?" There are two answers to be made to this question: The first is that at the present moment many colleges do not come into contact with the high schools on any basis, and it will be a good thing to adopt a scheme which



will drive colleges to a study of the secondary-school problem in detail.

The second answer is that the high school needs a jolt to save it from quantitative formalism. The unit is today a cover for defects. Anything that can bring about a reconsideration of the unit will make for progress. High schools and colleges will come together as a result of intelligent discussion of this standard which now holds them apart because it is a formal and an unsound standard.

A reconsideration of the unit is needed also for the sake of the student. With our present system, counting credits is more absorbing to the average student than mastering intellectual problems. If we began re-evaluating units in terms of the work actually done, students would gain an entirely different notion of the value of a high-school course. There is many a boy today who knows he can pass the course in the high school, and for that matter in college, without any effort, and he proceeds to take advantage of this knowledge by not doing any more work than the minimum that is required. One hears of the student who graduated with a slightly higher rank than was necessary and bemoaned the fact that he put in too much effort to get his degree. The high-school student who gets a mark so far above the passing mark that he is perfectly safe for graduation and for college recommendation is looked upon by his fellow-students as having exerted himself unjustifiably. If now one could turn about sharply and say to these students, "The better your mark, the more respect you will receive from the community; the better your mark, the higher the recommendation that the high school can give you, and the fuller the recognition that the college will accord you," the student would get a notion of intellectual work of a type altogether different from that which he now has. He would begin to realize that formal standards are not the real standards in the world at large. Of course, we should have some inco-ordinations for the time being. There would be high schools which would take advantage of their freedom, but the number of such high schools is no greater than the number of colleges that now exhibit all sorts of irregularities in college admission. The smug, self-righteous accusation of the

colleges that the high schools would take advantage of their regulations is utterly laughable to one who knows both institutions. The high schools are just as eager to organize themselves well as are the colleges, and the high schools are in general quite as competent as the colleges. If the comparison is made between the better high schools and better colleges, and the poorer high schools and the poorer colleges, it is doubtful which institution would come off better. The trouble is that the good colleges talk about the high schools in terms appropriate only to the lower-grade schools and forget that under the name of college masquerades many an institution which has no more right to be treated with respect than the high schools which are under accusation. The better high schools of this country know what they are about, and they can be intrusted with the duty of telling the colleges exactly what the qualifications of their graduates are. The poorer high schools cannot be intrusted with these functions and ought to be found out by being given a trial. As it stands now, there is always a college ready to receive the graduates of every high school.

The conclusion, therefore, is this: Let the high schools define the value of their units. Let both high schools and colleges study the problem of the value of work done. Let students and teachers alike give up the purely formal estimation of credits and recognize values in something like their true relations.